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ABSTRACT

Hypothesizing that students choosing their own topics would produce significantly more writing, a study examined the writing sample length of 42 sixth grade students who had been divided equally into two treatment groups. Treatments were counterbalanced so that during the first writing period students in one group wrote on topics they had selected themselves while those in the other group wrote on topics that the teacher had assigned. A week later, following a period without writing instruction, the treatments were reversed. Data analysis showed a significant difference in length of writing sample favoring students who selected their own topics. (HOD)

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STUDENT SELECTION OF TOPIC AND THE LENGTH OF SAMPLE WRITING

By

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ABSTRACT

It was hypothesized that students who chose their topics would write significantly longer samples than students who were assigned a topic. Forty-two sixth-grade students from a rural area in the Grovetown Elementary School, Columbia County, Georgia were used in the study. Samples were collected from two classrooms. The counterbalance design was applied in carrying out the study.

The statistical analysis of data showed a significance ($p < .01$) in the lengths of writing in favor of students selecting their own topics.

The researchers recommend allowing students to exercise personal preference in choosing a topic for writing samples rather than assigning a topic when increased length in writing is a desired objective of the assignment.

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STUDENT SELECTION OF TOPIC AND
THE LENGTH OF SAMPLE WRITING

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Context of the Problem

The purpose of teaching writing has been seen as a way of influencing perception, integration, thinking and expression; of enriching the lives of students by giving them tools for processing information from experience; and of increasing students' self-perception and environmental awareness. Two methods have been advanced for the teaching of writing. The first method involves giving a student the characteristics of good writing and then having the student practice them until he achieves them in his own writing. The second method calls for an experiential basis in writing whereby the student learns control of language by trying to communicate his experiences to others through his writing (West, 1971).

Because the first method has been traditionally used in the past, most teachers are more comfortable in using it. However, the second method is gaining in popularity and has many proponents. Nelson (1974) argues one should teach "languaging", rather than language, as a means for clarifying experience and establishing identity. She feels that teachers must lead students to the "discovery of words as tools by which to sculpt and re-sculpt raw

experience in order to discover its meaning and one's own relationship to that meaning."

In teaching written composition from an experiential base, it has been shown that children learn to use language in order to satisfy their own purposes. Children will use their experiences as a basis for establishing a relationship of mutual interest and trust with the reader, in which they are able to write about themselves, their systems of values, their innermost feelings, and their beliefs about the world. They gain satisfaction in having their views corroborated, challenged, or modified. In writing their evaluations of their own experiences, children are trying on roles, presenting themselves as they would like to be seen (Britton, 1977).

Teaching writing from an experiential base involves using language as it is actually used rather than emphasizing form and structure, which are only parts of linguistic competence. By writing through experience, the writer must go beyond mere verbal expression to reach the imagination, perception, intuition, and feeling it is necessary to reach in order to relate the effect of the experience to the reader (Brossell, 1977).

When early attempts at writing come from an experiential base, children are freed from being context-bound and learn to write for audiences of different kinds. As they practice their writing skills, they acquire a flexibility that allows them to select from a variety of

language options, which is a necessary feature of learning to write (Clay, 1982).

Children will write to express themselves, to inform, to persuade, and to create art for authenic audiences when they write from personal experiences. They learn writing to articulate personal experiences, to sort out thinking, and to structure responses. Writing from real experiences provides a more interesting alternative than writing from assigned topics, story starters, or copying from the board. Because the topics are more meaningful, children will develop an awareness of writing as a natural process for communication (Golden, 1980). Children who write about what they know and care about will learn to write using specific information with details, to write with authority, with honesty, using precise language with focus and a point of view, and to write with feeling (Calkins, 1978). They will use selective processes in creative problem solving which parallel some of the composing processes: the gathering and selection of details (observation of facts); the planning and selection of procedures; and the planning and selection of ways to evaluate the results or consequences. Thus children apply what they know about productive problem-solving which they have used before in unknown areas to composing in writing (Lundsteen, 1976).

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to examine the length of writing samples which were written by students who chose their topics from their personal experiences as opposed to writing samples which were written on topics assigned by the teacher.

If it could be shown that students actually would write longer compositions when allowed to select topics from their personal experiences than when assigned topics or given story starters, the educational implications would be quite significant. By writing more, students practice on their writing skills, and with teacher feedback, their writing skills are improved upon. Additionally, writing on a topic of their own choice and about their own personal experiences and perceptions could be most gratifying and self-motivating.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study was to supply teachers with a reason for assigning topics individually according to students' interests. Rather than assigning topics for children to write about, the teacher would allow children to choose their topics from their personal backgrounds and come to her for help in problems concerning mechanics and sentence structure which they encountered in their writing. In addition to writing longer compositions, students would be receiving the gratification from writing about that which was important to them.

CHAPTER II

SURVEY OF RELATED LITERATURE

Most of the research concerning written composition has been compiled in recent years. Although writing from a student's interest or from experience has been the subject of many studies, the data collected have also yielded some results in regard to length. These findings are presented in this chapter along with the other merits of writing from an experiential basis which can be achieved through allowing students to choose their own topics.

In a study involving 94 seven-year-old children, Graves (1975) sought to analyze data from their writing for theme, type of writing, number of words, use of accompanying art, and teacher comments. He found that when children are given a choice as to whether to write or not, and as to what they write, they write more and in greater length than when specific writing assignments are given. They also write without prior motivational activities or instruction by the teacher. Graves also found differences in the writings of boys and girls. While girls wrote more and to greater length in either assigned or unassigned writing, boys wrote more in unassigned writing. Moreover, unassigned writing serves as greater opportunity for boys to write about subjects not normally covered in teacher-assigned topics. They are more apt to choose topics

dealing with current events such as sports, history, and geography on a national and world scale. Girls are usually more inclined to write about activities and relationships occuring in the home and at school as they relate to them. These findings are further supported in a study by Bodkin (1978) of 120 boys and girls randomly selected from grades three and six in three socioeconomic settings. Bodkin studied the frequency of writing, length of the products, and the territoriality expressed in the content of entries written in journals over a ten-day period. In addition to supporting the findings by Graves concerning the differences between boys and girls and the territory covered in their writing, Bodkin observed that children in all groups write about out-of-school interests and activities; there is little correlation between reading comprehension test scores and ability to write well; and that children's interest in what they write about accounts for differences in the compositions with regard to length, sentence structure, clarity, and use of convention.

Koch (1977) also found that boys on the secondary level appear to be interested in writing about a much wider variety of subjects than girls, adding further support to the findings that writing assigned according to students' interests will allow for greater diversity in students' writing. She also found that both boys and girls write about how they feel and use their writing as a means for dealing with experiences and feelings and understanding

them better. Students also like to write to their friends in order to share their experiences, ideas, and feelings with them at this age level.

In a survey using a seven point scale to rate topics, Jackson (1968) studied the preferences of 40 female and 52 male seventh grade students. She found that males prefer titles involving sports, science, and animals while females prefer titles covering a great diversity of subject matter. Jackson further divided her findings according to intelligence and found that less intelligent students prefer concrete and personally relevant topics, whereas the intellectually bright students prefer more abstract titles concerning complicated views. In her conclusion, Jackson recommends that teachers consider the diversity of their classes, as well as the educational objectives of the assignment, when choosing a theme topic so as to meet the needs of students' attitudes towards their writing, which are significantly affected by the titles assigned. The problem can be dealt with by allowing students to choose their own topics whenever possible.

When fourth-and sixth-grade students were asked whether they prefer to choose their own topics rather than write on teacher-assigned topics, 67% of the fourth grade students interviewed preferred to choose their own topics, as did 80% of the sixth grade students in a survey of 276 students by Keeney (1976). The teachers of these students were also surveyed as to whether students would rather

choose their own topics. Surprisingly, the teachers of the fourth grade students predicted that 71% of their students would prefer to be given a topic, while the teachers of the sixth grade students predicted that 34% of their students would prefer to be given a topic. In this study Keeney also found a significant relationship between reading ability ($p < .01$), intelligence ($p < .01$), and children's performance in writing ($p < .001$) and teacher appraisal of their attitude toward writing. However, children's self-estimates of their writing performance (which were based on teacher judgements such as comments and marks, personal judgements, and the opinions of parents, siblings, and peers) were not related to their teachers' ratings of their writing performance.

In a study by Johnston (1978) story starters and general topics were used to evaluate the value of each as motivation for writing. Four hundred and four fifth- and sixth-grade students were divided into four groups. Students were ranked according to achievement scores and matched pairs were randomly assigned to either the experimental groups or to a control group which did no writing. The writing of the experimental groups using the story starters and general topics showed a significant difference ($p < .01$) in writing ability over the control groups. However, there was no significant difference between the experimental group using the story starters and the experimental group using the general topics, which

led to the conclusion that either type of topic would result in better writing. Based on attitude scores obtained both before and after the treatment, it was found that the writing experience also contributed to a more positive attitude toward writing, although there was no significant difference in attitude between the two experimental groups.

In a study by Hillocks (1979) it was hypothesized that students involved in observational activities such as recording tactile, visual, auditory, olfactory, and internal sensory perceptions would show greater gains in specificity than students in a more traditional sequence of instruction. The study utilized pupils in ten classrooms who were divided into five experimental and five control groups. Both groups wrote on the same topics. Combined pretest and posttest scores were subjected to a two-way analysis of covariance. Results showed that groups using observational activities showed significant gains ($p < .0001$) in greater specificity. There was also a correlation between specificity and creativity which led to the conclusion that papers judged to be more specific will also be judged to be more creative. In addition, there were also surprising gains in organization with a significant difference ($p < .0001$) between the two groups.

In a similar study, King (1974) increased the number of types of sensory stimulation prior to a writing experience to find the relationship between creativity and length.

Using 300 fourth-, sixth-, and eighth-grade students, she found that the creativity rating is strongly related to the length of stories and that increasing the number of types of sensory stimuli prior to a writing experience has more effect upon the length of stories than upon creativity of stories. These findings that children are better able to deal with topics with which they have had direct, hands-on experience seem to parallel the findings of James Britton (1980, as in Stellard) who states that children use language primarily to satisfy their own purposes and that once the intention involved is gone, the thought "must be processed in linguistic terms alone - without its original intention and contextual support. In the absence of such support, the task can strain the child's abilities, and reveal a more limited competence than may actually be present."

Hughes (1978) sees syntax as a bridge from the surface structure to the deep structure of language and writing as a vehicle for crossing that bridge. In a study involving 516 children, ages eight to eleven, in nineteen British and American classrooms, Hughes found that British children spend significantly more time in free writing per week, score from two to three grades higher in syntactic maturity, and write longer compositions than American children. In addition to writing compositions with twice as many words, the British children have a stronger sense of literary conventions and use more syntactic forms. There was also a significant difference ($p < .001$) between the reading

comprehension scores for the two groups which correlated highly with the syntactic maturity measures.

Bippus (1978) also found significant relationships between measures of quality of written language, productivity of writing, and reading comprehension of fourth- and sixth-grade students. Holt and Vacca (1981) state that "reading and writing are interdependent processes - necessary to one another and mutually beneficial for one another."

Calkins (1979) found that children in one third-grade classroom who wrote frequently and learned punctuation skills in context were better able to understand and use punctuation in isolation. The children who learned punctuation skills in context were able to explain 8.66 kinds of punctuation while the nonwriters could explain only 3.85. Forty-seven per cent of the writers understood that punctuation affects their pace and the inflection of their language compared to 9% of the nonwriters. Graves (1979) also found that children who have written about a personal topic will maintain interest in revising their work over a longer period of time.

In comparing the apprehension towards writing of 100 college freshmen using an experimental method utilizing small and large group activities and a conventional method of teaching composition, Fox (1979) found that while both groups' apprehension toward writing were reduced following the treatments, the students in the experimental groups

showed a faster rate in the reduction of apprehensions towards writing and produced writing that was as proficient in overall quality as the conventional group but was also significantly longer ($p < .056$).

In summary, research has shown that the teaching of writing affects reading ability and the development of syntax. By allowing children to write from experience, there is an increase in creativity, in the use of correct punctuation skills as they are needed, and in the use of different literary conventions. However, children must be allowed to write whenever possible and they should be encouraged to write as much as possible to obtain these results.

Although several studies have found cases in which unassigned writing is longer than assigned writing due to greater interest on the part of the child, these studies were mostly observational studies based on children's writings in journals rather than statistical analysis between different methods for assigning topics. The present researchers attempted to fill a void in this area.

CHAPTER III

PLANNING AND CONDUCTING THE STUDY

Research Hypothesis

For sixth-grade students, a writing sample based on a topic about which a student has expressed interest will be longer than one based upon a topic arbitrarily assigned by the instructor.

It stands to reason that unless the topic assigned by the instructor is based on a subject about which a student has had direct experience, the student would prefer to choose his own topic. If a student is more knowledgeable about a subject or is writing on a topic to entertain his reader, he is more likely to continue writing until he is satisfied he has achieved his objective.

Null Hypothesis

For sixth-grade students, a writing sample based on a topic about which a student has expressed interest will be no longer than one which was based upon a topic arbitrarily assigned by the instructor.

Identification of Variables

Independent variables:	student's selection of topic - presence versus absence
Dependent variable:	length of writing sample
Moderator variable:	not applicable
Control variables:	grade level, prewriting activities
Intervening variable:	motivation

Operational Definitions of Variables

Writing sample:	original composition by the student
Length of writing sample:	determined by the number of words in a writing sample
Topic about which a student has expressed interest:	selected by the student with no influence by the instructor
Topic arbitrarily assigned by the instructor:	writing sample based on topic designated by the teacher and given to the entire group at the same time.

Description of Research Design

The design employed in this study was based on using students as their own controls with counterbalancing of treatments. Two intact groups were used. The design is diagrammed as follows:

	First Week	Second Week
Group I	X_1	X_0
Group II	X_0	X_1

X_1 - Writing sample based on topic selected by student

X_0 - Writing sample based on topic assigned by teacher

The two groups were used to control for history and maturation as sources of threat to internal validity and to give a satisfactory number of subjects for the study. Since random assignment was not possible, and the use of a pretest would resemble the control treatment to such an extent that it would violate the external validity of the study through reactive effects of testing, the subjects were used as their own controls. The method of counterbalancing was used to equalize the effects of the two treatments upon each other.

Population and Sample

The population consisted of the sixth-grade students enrolled in Grovetown Elementary School in Columbia County, Georgia. These students were a mixture of children of military personnel who have attended schools at various bases around the world and students who are indigenous to this rural area. The subject pool was limited to two reading classes of the sixth grade. Each class contained approximately twenty students who were assigned to that class according to reading ability. Each class had three reading levels which were: (1) on grade level reading ability; (2) one year below grade level reading ability; and (3) two years below grade level reading ability. (Reading ability was determined by an Informal Reading

Inventory which accompanies the basal text and is given to each student individually).

Instrumentation and Data Collection

Two writing samples from each child were collected. One consisted of writing based on a topic in which the student had expressed interest and the other was based on a topic which the teacher assigned to the entire class. The two topics were collected and the total number of words counted. Every word was counted as a separate word, including indefinite articles and prepositions. Abbreviations (such as FBI) and numbers written as numerals were also counted as one word each.

The study was conducted during two one-hour class periods which were one week apart and with no instruction related to the study taking place during the intervening week. During the class period, the students were given the assignment and instructions to write for thirty minutes, to proofread their work, and then to revise their papers, correcting their mistakes. Students were also encouraged to proofread and correct one another's writing before revising their papers.

The topic assigned to the control group, based on a seasonal theme, was "The Life and Death of a Leaf." The topic was chosen because it was broad enough to allow students to create an imaginary leaf with a personality and background full of adventures or to give a scientific

account of the seasonal changes of a leaf. The topics of the experimental groups varied as the students were allowed to choose them according to their own interests.

The second treatment given a week later was conducted the same as the first treatment except that the order of the treatments was reversed. Those students who had chosen their topics the first week now wrote on the topic assigned by the teacher while the students who had written on the topic assigned by the teacher now wrote on topics which they chose according to their interests.

Data Analysis

The statistical test used in this study was the t-test with the formula for correlated means because the subjects were used as their own control. This test was chosen because the independent variable had two levels on the nominal scale and the dependent variable was in the interval scale. The one-tailed test was applied since the hypothesis was directional. The null hypothesis was to be rejected at the .05 level of significance.

Assumptions and Limitations

1. The generalization of the study was limited by the small number of subjects used.
2. Because sixth-grade students have had language arts courses in which writing was taught prior to this study, the results may have been influenced by their past experience with either treatment or both.

3. The normal method of teaching students to write in a language arts program involves motivational activities such as reading samples aloud, displaying them in the classroom, and publishing them in a student newsletter. Due to the lack of time and the nature of the study, these activities could not be implemented in this experiment.
4. Properly presented and carried through, either method of assigning topics may have been successful depending upon the instructor and the methods of presentation used. Since only one instructor was used to conduct the study, it was not possible to judge the effects of the study under other instructors who might have used other instructional methods which could have influenced the results of the study.
5. This study dealt with the quantity, rather than the quality, of students' writing. As such, no attempt was made in evaluating the spelling, grammatical correctness, or syntax development and usage. The reasoning was that at this grade level it was more important to increase the amount of writing in a composition in order to improve the quality of language usage.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS OF DATA

The *t*-test with the formula for correlated means was the statistical test performed in this study. A total of 42 students participated in the study with 21 students in each of two groups. The number of words in each writing sample were counted and compared for differences in length between the samples written by students who selected their own topics and by those same students when they wrote on topics assigned by the teacher.

The summary data and results of the statistical tests are shown below.

	Number of words in student-selected topic	Number of words in assigned topic
N =	42	42
ΣX =	4275	2976
$\bar{X}$ =	101.79	70.86
ΣX^2 =	587281	247716
SD =	60.92	29.98

$t = 3.17$

$df = 41$

$p < .01$

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to determine the effect of students' selection of their writing topic upon the length of their writing samples as opposed to the length of writing samples in which students wrote on topics which the teacher had assigned. Forty-two sixth-grade students from Grovetown Elementary School, Columbia County, Georgia, participated in the study.

Students' writing samples from two classrooms were used for data analysis. The treatments were counterbalanced so that one group wrote on topics which they had selected themselves while the other group wrote on topics which the teacher had assigned during the first writing period. A week later the treatments were reversed for the second writing period. There was no instruction given during the intervening week which was related to the study.

The data analysis showed that there is a significant difference in length ($p < .01$) between writing samples in which students were allowed to choose their own topics and those in which the topic was assigned by the teacher, with the former containing more words.

Therefore, the researchers maintain that when increased length of writing samples is a desired objective in a writing lesson, the instructor should allow students

to choose their own topics. This might be done by presenting a list of topics previously suggested by students which would be broad enough to encompass the interests of the entire class, or by allowing students to write from personal experiences on topics not included in the list.

Once increased length of writing samples has been achieved, the mechanics and organization of writing can be examined and improved upon. Studies by Bodkin (1978) show that children's interest in what they write accounts for differences in regard to length, sentence structure, clarity, and use of convention. King (1974) and Bippus (1978) also found significant relationships between productivity of writing and the quality of written language. Research, however, is needed to determine the effects of methods used in assigning topics upon the ability to capture a child's interest in his writing and the quality of the writing produced.

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APPENDIX

	X_1	X_0	D	D^2
1.	66	55	11	121
2.	67	46	21	441
3.	72	67	5	25
4.	73	62	11	121
5.	107	106	1	1
6.	92	48	44	1936
7.	65	52	13	169
8.	57	31	26	676
9.	74	49	25	625
10.	83	69	14	196
11.	133	85	48	2304
12.	66	74	- 8	64
13.	73	88	-15	225
14.	82	57	25	625
15.	61	57	4	16
16.	76	54	22	484
17.	58	64	- 6	36
18.	47	42	5	25
19.	70	132	-62	3844
20.	97	126	-29	841
21.	46	72	-26	676
22.	118	27	91	8281
23.	68	43	25	625
24.	129	63	66	4356
25.	140	142	- 2	4
26.	44	32	12	144
27.	145	75	70	4900
28.	130	132	- 2	4
29.	359	61	298	88804
30.	183	83	100	10000
31.	98	56	42	1764
32.	100	65	35	1225
33.	268	38	230	52900
34.	159	116	43	1849
35.	165	89	76	5776
36.	49	101	-52	2704
37.	78	44	34	1156
38.	99	94	5	25
39.	106	40	66	4356
40.	157	119	38	1444
41.	37	51	-14	196
42.	78	69	9	81
	N = 42	N = 42	ΣD = 1299	ΣD^2 = 204045
	M = 101.79	M = 70.86		
	ΣX^2 = 587281	ΣX^2 = 247716		
	SD = 60.92	SD = 29.98		